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ABSTRACT

This report analyzes the reasons why parents in Minnesota choose to homeschool their children. The survey, on which the report is based, is part of a larger study examining each of the types of school-choice options available in Minnesota. Three research questions guided the survey: What are the demographic characteristics of families who choose to homeschool their children? What are the reasons parents homeschool their children? and To what extent is special education or the child's special needs a factor in the homeschooling decision? Participants in the study were homeschooling parents who had at least one kindergarten through 12th-grade child homeschooled in 1997. The results of the survey fell into five major categories: educational philosophy, special needs of the child, school climate, family lifestyle and parenting philosophy, and religion and ethics. Several subcategories within each main topic area were reviewed to understand the parents' reasons. Parents were asked if special education or special needs were factors in their decision to homeschool their child. Results show that special education or the child's special needs was a factor for many parents who homeschooled, which suggests policy implications for both homeschooling parents and special education. Considerable variety in the reasons reported for homeschooling was evident. (Contains 17 references.) (RJM)

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Research Report No. 29

Homeschooling: Parents' Reasons for Transfer and the Implications for Educational Policy

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Abstract

Homeschooling is one of the oldest school choice options available to parents and their children; however, it is not often regarded as a school choice optionm, nor has there been much review of how the advent of school choice may be affecting homeschooling. In this report, the reasons parents choose to homeschool their children in Minnesota are reported. Minnesota has some of the most comprehensive school choice options and homeschooling is one of the most popular. The results of a survey of homeschooling parents found reasons fall into five major categories: Educational philosophy, special needs of the child, school climate, family lifestyle and parenting philosophy, and religion and ethics. There were several subcategories within each main topic area that must be reviewed to understand the parents' reasons. In addition, parents were asked if special education or special needs were factors in their decision to homeschool their child. Special education or the child's special needs was a factor for many parents suggesting policy implications for both homeschooling parents and special educators.

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Providing parents and their children a choice of educational options has been one of the major reforms of the past decade. School choice has taken many forms, from open enrollment to charter schools. One type of school choice option that has been available for many years and growing in popularity is homeschooling. It is estimated that anywhere from 500,000 to 1,200,000 students are homeschooled in America (Ray, & Marlow, 1995; Van Gelen & Pitman, 1991). Some researchers estimate an annual growth rate of 15%.

The homeschooling option gives parents the most freedom of any school choice option. In educating their children at home they have control over the curriculum, schedule, training requirements, and educational delivery. It joins the myriad of options each providing different levels of bureaucratic freedom. Research is currently being conducted on many of the other school choice options documenting the reasons parents choose these options.

While in the past, homeschooling was often the only way parents could exercise control over their child's educational delivery model, with the advent of school choice it becomes one of many options. Does the entrée of other school choice options make homeschooling a more viable alternative for more families, as choice in education is becoming more and more common? What do parents tell us about their reasons for homeschooling their children? Do these reasons differ from those cited in the current literature base?

Reasons for Homeschooling

Current review of the literature suggests there are three major reasons parents choose to homeschool their children. Often parents choose to homeschool their children due to a combination of these reasons. The most frequently cited reason for homeschooling is based on spiritual or religious views (Pearson, 1996; Reinhiller & Thomas, 1996; Knowles, Muchmore & Spaulding, 1994; Gray, 1993; Resetar, 1990; Howell, 1989; Mayberry, 1989; Groover & Endsley, 1988). Within this category, parents discuss how conflicts over values, curriculum, and discipline methods shape their reasons for homeschooling (Pearson, 1996; Reinhiller & Thomas, 1996; Gray, 1993; Groover & Endsley 1988). Other parents share a belief that their religion

mandates parental responsibility for education (Ray, 1992). Still others have a desire to control the content of their child's education so it is consistent with spiritual or religious beliefs. Others wish to protect children from unwanted influences, particularly unwanted philosophies and beliefs, or pass on to children the family's religious or world view (Mayberry, 1989; Mayberry & Knowles, 1989).

A second major category of reasons for homeschooling currently cited relates to the parents' perception that the public or private school environment is harmful to their child. Negative peer influence, a less stressful and competition home environment, and the desire for parents to have primary responsibility for their child's socialization are commonly cited reasons (Cappello, Mullarney & Cordeiro, 1995; Knowles, 1989; Pearson, 1996; Gray, 1993; Howell, 1989; Mayberry, 1989; Mayberry & Knowles, 1989; Knowles, Muchmore & Spaulding, 1994; Groover & Endsley, 1988),.

Meeting the family's lifestyle needs constitute a third major category of reported reasons for homeschooling. Family unity and time together, inaccessibility and cost of private schools, and the special needs of an individual family are cited as examples of family needs (Cappello et al., 1995; Gray, 1993; Howell, 1989; Reinhiller & Thomas, 1996; Mayberry, 1989; Mayberry & Knowles, 1989; Groover & Endsley, 1988).

Though not cited as often as the three major categories, there are several aspects of quality for which parents are concerned. These include the quality of teachers, instruction, physical environment, school governance, and the quality of schools, in general. In addition, parents report concerns about inadequate academic standards and the financial status of the school or district (Gray, 1993; Groover & Endsley, 1988; Knowles, 1989; Reinhiller & Thomas, 1996).

What is less understood is the role special education and special needs issues play in parents' decision to homeschool their children. Anecdotal information suggests that as school choice has become more commonplace, philosophical reasons for homeschooling have become less paramount. Many parents report choosing the homeschooling option because their child's individual needs are not being met in the public or private school. In the current literature, there is

some mention of special needs as reasons for homeschooling; however, there are few recent references and this is an area for which little is known (Knowles, Muchmore & Spaulding, 1994; Gray, 1993; Groover & Endsley, 1988; Ensign, 1998; Howell, 1989).

Minnesota's Experience

Minnesota was the first state to propose and pass comprehensive school choice legislation. The first charter school opened in the state in 1991 and joined second chance options, postsecondary options, and open enrollment in the state's menu of options. However, throughout the past decade one of the fastest growing options in the state has been homeschooling. There are currently over 12,000 students who are being homeschooled in Minnesota. The University of Minnesota's Enrollment Options Project has been investigating the various Minnesota options, reasons parents choose them, and outcomes for students who participate in them. Little is known, however, about reasons Minnesota parents are choosing homeschooling and how these reasons may or may not be different than those of parents who choose other options.

University of Minnesota researchers have also been interested in the role special education plays in parent choice. It has been documented that students with disabilities are participating in all of Minnesota's school choice options and that special education reasons often motivate parents to choose a school other than one in their resident district (Lange and Ysseldyke, 1998). What is not known is the role special education may play in homeschooling decisions. Often, it is assumed that the main reason parents choose homeschooling is based on religious beliefs. Given this point of view, educational policymakers and administrators have had little reason to question their own methods and educational practices and the effect they may have on homeschooling decisions. Since much of the homeschooling research has been sponsored or published by homeschooling advocates there is justification for a rationale that assumes religion is the principal issue in the homeschooling decision. However, as school choice becomes more commonplace, the general public, too, may see homeschooling, as another option by those for whom religion is not the major factor. If this is the case, it has implications for school administrators and policymakers.

With more and more parents choosing an option outside the mainstream of education, it is important for policymakers and educators to understand the motivation of parents. With that knowledge, those in the mainstream of educational delivery can more effectively address the issues that motivate parents to choose homeschooling or any other option.

In this report, we present the findings from a comprehensive survey of Minnesota parents who homeschool their children. Minnesota's history of school choice options provides an excellent environment in which to independently address the reasons parents homeschool their children. The state has embraced school choice options and results may provide insight into direction homeschooling is heading as more and more parents are given a wide array of educational options. Three research questions guided the survey:

1. What are the demographic characteristics of families who choose to homeschool their children?
2. What are the reasons parents homeschool their children?
3. To what extent is special education or the child's special needs a factor in the homeschooling decision?

This study on homeschooling is part of a larger study examining each of the types of school choice options available in Minnesota. Analyses of charter schools in Minnesota (Lange & Lehr, in press) indicated that more students with disabilities were choosing to attend charter schools than educators or policymakers had foreseen and this situation had significant implications for educational policy during a time of educational reform. Therefore, the homeschooling study was planned to add to the knowledge base about students with disabilities and/or learning or behavior problems, their educational choices and the implications for policy as well as understanding reasons given by all parents regardless of their child's disability status.

In order to place the homeschooling of students with special needs within a larger context, researchers surveyed homeschooling families with all types of students to answer the research questions listed above. Future reports will address specifically the differences between parents with and without special needs children as they relate to homeschooling. The intent of this report

is to describe the larger context of homeschooling in the state and parents reasons for choosing to homeschool.

Methods

Participants

Minnesota has over 12,000 students who receive their education through the homeschooling option. Participants in this study were homeschooling parents or guardians who had at least one kindergarten through 12th grade child homeschooled in 1997. A stratified sample of parents of these students were sent surveys asking for their reasons for choosing homeschooling, family demographic characteristics, and special education considerations. The population was stratified by location and the size of the school district in which they reside. We estimated the number of homeschooling families at 5,000 (12,000-homeschooling students reported to Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning estimating 2.5 children per family). We needed a sample size of approximately 350 families to be confident in the results. Homeschooling literature suggests that families who homeschool their children are reluctant to share information with official organizations. Taking this into consideration, we oversampled (n=740).

The state was divided into four quadrants representing the northeast, northwest, southeast, and southwest sections of the state. Each of these areas is distinctive in population density and economic development, both of which may influence homeschooling decisions. School districts were chosen within each quadrant based upon their proportions of special education students, homeschooled students, school district type (rural, suburban, urban), and enrollment. School districts from rural areas were included in the sample if they had more than 2.5% of their student population homeschooled. Larger districts were included if they had at least 50 students who were homeschooled.

Procedures

We wanted to get as representative sample as possible and did not want the parents' philosophical orientation to play a role in respondent selection. Therefore, we worked through the school districts instead of any advocacy organization. School districts meeting the criteria were contacted for approval to participate in the study. Eleven school districts with a total of 740 homeschooling families agreed to participate in the study.

Surveys were distributed by the school district in order to maintain privacy for the participants and to reach as many families as possible. Surveys were returned to the research staff at the University of Minnesota. Surveys were color coded so we could determine the respondents' location according to the selected quadrant to ensure a representative sample.

Instrument

A review of the homeschooling literature was conducted in the fall of 1997 using the ERIC and PsychLit electronic databases for 1987-1997. In addition, local and national homeschooling websites were informally scanned to determine major issues of relevance to homeschoolers. Based on the review of the literature and information gleaned from the websites, a survey was developed. The research team and the Minnesota Survey Research Center reviewed drafts of the survey. Surveys were piloted on nine families who homeschool their children.

Data Analysis

All items were coded and analyzed descriptively. A question on reasons parents homeschool their children was open ended and was coded using qualitative data analysis techniques (Miles and Huberman, 1995). Coding was done independently by two researchers and compared for inter-rater reliability.

Results

Two hundred nine of the 740 surveys sent were returned for a return rate of 28%; however, we reached 60% of our target goal of 350 respondents. Eleven surveys were discarded due to illegible answers. One hundred ninety-eight surveys were analyzed. It should be noted that one of our goals was to gain information about special education and homeschooling; the respondents may be skewed toward those with an interest in special education issues.

What are the Demographic Characteristics of Families Who Chose to Homeschool Their Children?

Number of children. The majority (80%) of families who homeschool their children have three or fewer children. A small percentage reported having more than five children. The greatest percentage (87%) of parents reported homeschooling between one and three children with 29% homeschooling two children. Most respondents were not newcomers to homeschooling with nearly 75% of the parents reporting they had homeschooled at least one child for more than one year. The percentage of families with one to seven children is presented in Table 1. In Table 2, the percentage of children homeschooled is reported.

Table 1. Number of Children in the Family

Number of K-12 Children in the Family	Valid Percent (n= 195)
1	22
2	33
3	25
4	15
5	03
6	02
7	01

Note: May add up to more than 100% due to rounding.

Table 2. Number of Children in the Family who are Homeschooled

Number of K-12 Children Homeschooled	Valid Percent (n=197)
1	43
2	29
3	15
4	9
5	3
6	1
7	1

Note: May add up to more than 100% due to rounding.

Public or private school attendance. The majority of parents reported their first child had attended a public or private school at some point in their schooling. Fewer siblings had attended a public or private school suggesting those parents made their homeschooling decision with their first child and continued with subsequent children.

Special needs considerations. Nearly 40% of the parents whose children had attended a public or private school report their child(ren) had some learning or behavior difficulties while attending those schools. Thirty percent of the first and second children had received special education services while in the public and private school.

Family characteristics. The majority of the parents were European American (93%). Less than 50% of the mothers (49%) and 57% of the fathers had graduated from college. Families' household income was across the income continuum with approximately the same proportion of families making less than 20,000 dollars as those making more than 75,000 dollars. The educational and economic characteristics are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

While the percentage of European Americans homeschooling their children is higher than the proportion of European Americans nationwide, is similar to the proportion (93.4%) in the state

of Minnesota recorded for 1997 (www.mnplan.sate.mn.us/demography/deomg-3a-97.html). There is a higher percentage of homeschooling parents who have some college or a college and/or professional degree compared to US census data from 1990. However, it should be kept in mind, that the U.S. census data provides information for all adults over the age of 25, including those who are older and are less likely to have a high diploma or a college degree. A more pertinent comparison may be the percentage of teachers who have college degrees since this is the comparative educating group.

Though it is difficult to compare family income with U.S. census data given the manner in which the questions are formed and the date at which they were asked, available data suggest a greater proportion of higher income families homeschool their children than the Minnesota population, in general.

Table 3. Educational Level of Parents who Homeschool Their Children

Education Level	Mother or Female Guardian	Father or Male Guardian
	Valid Percent	Valid Percent
	(n=182)	(n=171)
Less than High School	0	1
Some High School	1	1
High School graduate	15	6
Some Technical College	2	4
Technical College Graduate	3	9
Some College	0	22
College Graduate	40	34
Post Graduate/ Professional Degree	7	23
Other	2	1

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Table 4. Family Income Level for Parents who Homeschool Their Children

Income Level	Valid Percent (n=162)
Below $10,000	4
$10,000-$19,999	11
$20,000-$29,999	16
$30,000-$39,999	24
$40,000-$49,999	13
$50,000-$75,000	18
$75,000 or more	14

What are the Reasons Parents Homeschool Their Children?

Parents were asked to respond to an open-ended question asking their reasons for homeschooling each of their children. The open-ended method was used so as to ensure an unbiased and open response item. Through quantitative coding methods emerging patterns were identified. Unduplicated responses were counted within each subcategory to determine the robustness of the responses. There may be some duplication within the larger categories. Two hundred and thirty seven comments were analyzed from 195 respondents. Three respondents did not complete this item. Parents were asked to provide the reason for homeschooling each of their children. Consequently, the number of responses is greater than the number of respondents. However, for the majority of parents, the reasons provided for homeschooling their first child was the same reason given for their other children. When parents gave the same reason for multiple children, only the first reason was coded. If a different reason was reported for multiple children, the reasons were included in the analysis. Parents often gave many reasons within one statement; these were coded separately.

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For ease of interpretation, five broad categories were identified. Parents' reasons for homeschooling fall into five broad categories with several subcategories within each one. Attention should be paid to the subcategories within each broader category when interpreting the findings. The broad categories include reasons related to:

- Educational Philosophy;
- Special Needs of the Child; and
- School Climate;
- Family Lifestyle and Parenting Philosophy; and
- Religion and Ethics.

In Table 5, the main thematic categories and subcategories are listed with the number of responses per category followed by examples of the reasons provided.

Although many parents noted religious and ethical reasons for educating their children at home, a surprising number of parents report reasons that focus on other issues. Many parents report homeschooling to meet the individual needs of their child or children or to meet the needs of their family and their chosen lifestyles. These reasons appear to be often independent of religious beliefs.

While there is not duplication within each subcategory, there may be duplication among the broad category. There was considerable overlap as parents had multiple reasons for homeschooling their children. This is evident in the examples of reasons presented below.

Table 5. Parents' Reasons for Homeschooling Their Children by Categories

Category and Subcategories	Number of Responses (Unduplicated within Subcategory)
Educational Philosophy	**182**
• Academic Standards and Educational Quality	72
• Implementation of Individualized Instruction	53
• Teaching Methods or Philosophy	30
• Curriculum and Materials	27
Special Needs of Their Child(ren)	**94**
• Child's Feelings About School	29
• Child's Disability, Health and Learning Issues	28
• Child's Social/Emotional Difficulties	21
• Child's Need for Challenge	16
School Climate	**81**
• Learning Environment	36
• Social Aspects of Education	33
• Parent-Teacher Relationship	6
• Transportation Issues	6
Family Lifestyle and Parenting Philosophy	**78**
• Parents' Personal Reasons	47
• Family Relationship Issues	21
• Parental Roles and Responsibilities	10
Religious and Ethical Beliefs	**78**
• Moral/Values (no religion mentioned)	30
• Christian	27
• Religious (nonspecific)	21

Educational Philosophy

Academic Standards and Quality of Education

- "[We wanted] to achieve academic excellence through personalized instruction and high standards."
- "[We wanted] to provide a higher quality of education."

Individualized Instruction

- "[There is] a great advantage of going at an individual student's pace, respecting their learning style."
- "We can accommodate individual abilities easier than can a teacher with 25-30 students."

Teaching Methods and Philosophy

- [We] struggled with the methods that were used in school. He's a hands-on learning and ten years ago [when we started homeschooling], schools didn't teach to that style of learner."
- [We] had a difference in educational philosophy than from the norm."

Curriculum and Materials

- "When we visited our public schools, their textbooks and curriculum seemed simple and unchallenging. It was geared for teaching the Asian community who were just learning English."
- "Homeschooling allows so much variety in its curriculum and activities. The opportunities are endless of wonderful, rich, education with one-on-one teaching."

School Climate

Learning Environment

- "Classrooms' size continue to get bigger at the local schools."
- "[Child] came home every day with a headache. The teacher was yelling constantly just to get heard above the constant noise and talk and activities. Who can learn anything in these kinds of environments?"

Social Aspects of Education

- "[We were] desiring to reduce the peer influence on our children which we see as usually negative."
- "Social pressures of 5th grade drove her crazy (boyfriends, clothes). You couldn't be yourself; to fit in you had to be like the group."

Parent-Teacher Relationships

- "We could not tolerate the rude behavior on the part of teachers."
- "Parents [are] not welcome in the classroom."
- "Available teachers were not best match [with our child]."

Special Needs of Child

Child's Feelings about School

- "[Our child] hated school since kindergarten; although a good student."
- "[We] couldn't get our child to go to school—wouldn't stay there when he went—was sometimes belligerent in class."

Child's Disability, Health and Learning Issues

- "My son has ADHD and Asperger's Syndrome. The school pushed me to put him on drugs. I did, and I couldn't stand it. It also did not make him 'wonderful' in school."
- "This child was having reading and learning difficulties that were not being diagnosed or addressed."
- "[He] has an allergic-like reaction to fluorescent lights."

Child's Social and Emotional Difficulties

- "Emotional stress in class was escalated by our divorce."
- "He doesn't focus easily and through the years of being in public school has continued to get farther behind and as a result has little self-confidence. He also didn't do well socially so the two put together were going to be disastrous."

Child's Need for Challenge

- "Child needed more challenge academically."
- "[There was] boredom with the traditional school; didn't feel he was learning as he could."

Family Lifestyle and Parenting Philosophy

Parent-Child Relationship

- "Wanted to invest time in junior high years building relationship and encouraging study skills and self-worth."
- "Believe the parent-child relationship is the best possible context for learning-mentoring."

Parents' Personal Concerns

- "I find teaching my own children is a very enjoyable addition to my daily schedule."
- "Thought is fit best with our family schedule and lifestyle."
- "[We homeschool] to be able to take two big, long family trips this school year and to enhance their academics."

Parental Roles and Responsibilities

- "Homeschooling is a great way to extend your child rearing."
- "We wanted to raise to raise our children—part of that parental responsibility is education. We chose to do it ourselves."

Religious and Ethical

- "I wanted our values to be in them—not the school systems."
- "We wanted...to be able to use the Bible throughout their teachings."
- "[We wanted] freedom to teach her using Christian values as a base for all subjects."

To what extent is special education or the child's special needs a factor in the homeschooling decision?

When parents were asked if the presence of a learning/behavior problem or disability entered into their decision to homeschool their child, 22% of the respondents answer in the affirmative for their first child. Only 9% report their child's special needs are a factor in their homeschooling decision for their second child suggesting that many parents make the initial homeschooling decision based upon the needs of their first child and continue with the option with the siblings. The reasons given in the open-ended item in the survey support the strength of this response.

Of parents who report their child has a special need, 15% report their first child and their second child received special services in the public or private school prior to their homeschooling decision. This represents 10% of the total surveyed and corresponds to the percent of students who receive special education in Minnesota's public schools.

Discussion

Homeschooling is another option being accessed by many parents and students within the United States. Minnesota is no different than many other states in that the numbers of parents who are choosing to homeschool are increasing each year. The reasons these parents are choosing this option, particularly given the context of school choice in Minnesota, makes a review interesting and relevant.

Minnesota parents have, perhaps, the greatest number of options available to them through the state's school choice option menu. Since 1989 most students have been able to apply for enrollment in any of the state's 300 plus school districts through the open enrollment option. In

addition, junior and senior students may apply to enroll in postsecondary institutions for high school and/or college credit at no expense to the student. Students who are identified as at-risk for school failure may attend one of hundreds of alternative schools designed specifically to meet their needs or at any time enroll in a school district other than the one in their attendance area. Minnesota was the first state to offer parents charter schools and currently has over 30 schools available for students. However, within this environment of educational options, homeschooling is one of the fastest growing options in the state.

The reasons parents give for homeschooling their children vary. The findings from this survey affirmed the variability of homeschooling families that were found in other surveys conducted by groups more closely tied to the homeschooling movement. As Ray (1992) pointed out, "An attempt to homogenize home school families in order to understand them may lead a person further from capturing the richness of many dimensions that are so much a part of the homeschooling community (p. 4)." There was considerable variety in the reasons reported for homeschooling; yet, themes emerged that may have implications for educational policy in this era of school choice. The most frequently reported reasons for homeschooling were in the area of *Educational Philosophy*. This category was divided into four main areas: Academic standards and educational quality; implementation of individualized instruction; teaching methods or philosophy; and curriculum and materials.

Many parents reported reasons related to dissatisfaction with the educational quality and academic standards of their public schools. Parents provided examples of how the school in their attendance area did not meet their standard of excellence. This is an interesting reason when viewed in the context of school choice options as most parents have the opportunity to choose another school district through open enrollment. Minnesota has many school districts with excellent reputations that are being accessed by students through open enrollment. Reasons provided by open enrollment parents are similar to the academic standards reason given by homeschooling parents; yet, homeschooling parents have chosen a different option.

The other reasons cited by parents perhaps add some insight into the educational quality reason and its implication for educational policy. Another frequently reported reason was in the area of individualized instruction. Findings suggest parents believe they can provide more educational stimulation and material through the individualized instruction in the homeschooling delivery model. If homeschooling is considered another school choice option and is one with which school districts must compete, individualized learning plans and other educational tactics should possibly be considered more often within the traditional school setting.

Many parents also cite other reasons related to their educational philosophy. The desire to have more control over curriculum and materials, instructional delivery, and teaching methods were frequently given as their reason for homeschooling. This becomes more interesting when put in the context of school choice in Minnesota where charter schools may be formed by parents who desire more influence in the educational philosophy of their schools. While homeschool parents may receive some tax relief due to their homeschooling decision, charter schools enjoy public funding at rates similar to the traditional public schools. How do school choice options such as charter schools impact homeschooling decisions? Are more parents choosing to homeschool their children based upon philosophical beliefs due to an educational culture within the state that embraces parents' right to choose?

Groover, S.V. and Endsley, R.C. (1988) summarized the implication for educational administrators. "Rather than regarding the study of homeschoolers as irrelevant for educational practice, early childhood educators and other educational specialists might consider this movement as another social indicator of the health of our schools, and the practices of homeschooling parents and the outcomes for their children as providing clues for ways to make necessary educational reform." If homeschooling is viewed as another option rather than an anomaly, it joins the other options in providing information that may assist educational leaders in more fully meeting the needs of their constituency or providing data relevant to the other school choice options.

Another major category of reasons for homeschooling was *Special Needs of Their Child*. This category was of particular interest since the extent to which special education or special needs

motivate parents to homeschool is unknown. Parents provided reasons in four areas: Child's feelings about school; child's disability, health, and learning issues; child's social/emotional difficulties; and child's need for challenge. Each of these has implications for educational policy and practice.

Many parents reported their child's negative feelings about school were such that they affected their child's ability to perform. The parents' comments begged the question as to what was the etiology of the feelings. What is unknown is the extent to which parents communicated their child's fears and sought support from the school district in dealing with the issue. However, the reason does support the need for exit interview or survey information being collected by school districts. A study of school districts that gain or lose students through open enrollment found that savvy school administrators often gained students regardless of educational quality issues. One of the reasons was due to the relationship they fostered with parents and their attention to those who were exiting their school districts through school choice options (Lange, 1995). If school districts want to keep their students (for funding or other reasons), it may be useful to survey their homeschooling parent population to learn how they could have better met their needs and the needs of their children.

The other categories under *Special Needs of Children* also support this kind of relationship building. Many parents discussed the lack of program available for their child with a disability or other learning need. The survey findings suggest that approximately 10% of homeschooling students have been served in special education. This being the case there are implications for special education and homeschooling. Why are parents opting out of the special education system and taking the responsibility themselves? What role does special education play as a support for homeschooling parents? Is individualized instruction a large enough factor to influence student performance? If so, what does this mean for the delivery of special education? In surveys conducted with parents who are accessing other Minnesota school choice options, we found that relationships were key to motivating parents and/or students to participate in the option. This was

particularly true for parents whose child had a disability or special need (Lange & Ysseldyke, 1998).

Some parents expressed the need for more challenge for their children. However, fewer than expected gave this as a reason for homeschooling. It, too, has implications for the role that the individual student's need plays in structuring our educational delivery system. Do administrators and teachers need to address more fully the individual needs of the student and provide for these needs? In a state such as Minnesota, is a menu of options adequate to meeting the individual needs of students? In other words, is that the only avenue parents have if they desire their child's need to be met as an individual and not as a member of a grade level or age group? Reasons provided by charter school and open enrollment parents echo the sentiment that they want their children to be viewed as individuals rather than members of the group. The implications for educational practice are quite profound as it may mean a restructuring of the way students are viewed and taught.

School Climate reasons emerged as important motivators for homeschooling. Parents wanted a learning environment that enhanced their child's ability to perform, a positive social environment, and good relationships with teachers. School climate is becoming a bigger issue within the educational reform debate. Providing an environment that is conducive to learning and respects the various learning styles is under more and more scrutiny. Again, homeschooling parents do not differ from many parents who are accessing other options (Ysseldyke, Lange, & Gorney, 1994). Does homeschooling provide just another environment for which parents can choose, or do school administrators need to be more proactive in reviewing their school climate and its effect on students and parents? If these themes are emerging across all or many of the options, what role do administrators have in addressing the issues?

Many parents also choose to homeschool their children for reasons that are personal to their family's lifestyle or parenting philosophies as well as for religious reasons. Though there is a common view that many, if not most, homeschooling parents choose to do so because of religious reasons, the results from this survey suggest this is one of many reasons. Equally supported is the

notion that parents want to form a lifestyle that does not center on the traditional school calendar or beliefs about parenting and schooling.

Parents are homeschooling their children for many different reasons. Many of these do, in fact, have import when discussing educational policy and practice. In the context of school choice, homeschooling is becoming another or many options available. Reasons seem to be less focused on religious or ethical considerations and moving more toward philosophical and educational delivery rationales. Given this possible shift, school administrators and policymakers have an opportunity to review how this option if affecting their school districts and how they can better meet the needs of these individuals.

Limitations of the Research

Due to the uniqueness of the homeschooling population and to the circumstances surrounding this study, there were limitations to the use of the survey findings. School districts provided the names of homeschooling families and sent them the survey. This ensured we were getting a representative sample of families; however, it also meant that we could not do the necessary follow-up to increase our return rate and had to rely on the lists present within the school districts. We also were aware that some parents may have negative attitudes toward the school district and would not respond.

Since we were asking many questions about special education and special needs, we may have gotten an inordinate number of parents who have concerns in that area. However, we tried to address this by having all general items at the beginning of the survey in hopes all parents would be encouraged to complete the survey. We did use terminology that was not specific to special education since we have found that parents are not familiar with the educational terms. This meant we were less likely to get actual numbers of students who had been on individualized learning programs and more likely to identify all students whose parents consider them in need of some type of services.

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